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Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship

JAMES FREDERICKS

Some years ago, I enjoyed a fine Japanese lunch with my friend and teacher, Masao Abe, the great exponent of Zen Buddhism and leader in the dialogue among Buddhists and Christians. Professor Abe has taught me wonderful things about Buddhism for some twenty years now. I gathered with him and his wife, Ikuko Abe, in a traditional restaurant in Kyoto. We had a private room with a low table and sat on *tatami* mats. Abe Sensei (“Sensei” is a term of endearment and respect for a teacher used in Japan) had been somewhat pensive and withdrawn for most of the meal. Mrs. Abe and I had been bantering about how late the *tsuyu* rains had been that year and the effect it was having on Kyoto’s hydrangea. Suddenly Sensei began to speak with an unusual tone of voice, as if saying something of great importance to no one in particular. “It is not enough,” he said. Mrs. Abe and I fell silent and attentive. He repeated himself in the same voice: “It is not enough.” I knew immediately what my teacher was talking about. In his old age and after a long and distinguished career of teaching and lecturing about Zen in the West, Abe Sensei was talking about a Buddhist teaching dear to his heart, “the standpoint of emptiness.” Out of politeness, I did not want to indicate that I understood his meaning so directly and sat, wondering what I should say in response. Finally, I settled on something like this: “I will continue to study; Sensei, please continue to teach.” I spoke in the most formal Japanese I could muster, out of respect for my teacher, but also out of friendship.

I am not sure how I should describe my relationship with Masao Abe. To call us colleagues in the dialogue among Buddhists and Christians hardly does justice to how dear he is to me. To call me his *deshi* (disciple) does not fit the expectations this word conjures in Japan. He and I disagree professionally over many important matters. Besides, Sensei is a Buddhist and I am not. Is Masao Abe my friend? He is thirty-five years my senior and a distinguished scholar. In Japan at least, calling us friends (*tomodachi*) would be presumptuous. I will stick with friendship, however, and will try to justify the term by qualifying it. My friendship with Abe Sensei is a *spiritual* friendship. I want to write about this spiritual friendship and reflect on what my teacher meant that day in Kyoto when he said, “it is not enough.”



Friendship is a familiar theme in Christian spirituality. This is hardly surprising. Friendships humanize. Friendships must therefore be related in basic ways to our spiritual lives. The one who is without friends is poor indeed. More specifically, I am interested in spiritual friendships with those who follow other religious paths. I think we should look on these “inter-religious friendships” as a form of Christian spiritual practice. Friendships that reach across the boundaries of community, doctrine, scripture, asceticism and liturgy that separate religious believers should rightly be recognized as new opportunities for exploring Christian spirituality. Certainly this is the case with my friendship with Masao Abe. Sensei’s Buddhist path is central, not incidental, to our friendship. Inter-religious friendships are not common. They are not unheard of either. Gustav Weigel’s friendship with Rabbi Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton’s friendship with D.T. Suzuki (one of Abe Sensei’s mentors) come readily to mind.

Friendships with those who follow other religious paths contribute to human flourishing. They are a way of building up new forms of solidarity between religious communities. The virtue of inter-religious friendship also helps us to resist vices, like our propensity to fear those who are different. In our sinfulness, fear leads us to demonize, caricature, or simply ignore the Other. A spiritual friendship with someone who follows another religious path helps us to resist not only intolerance, but also our penchant for developing elaborate theological schemes that reduce the Other to what David Tracy calls “simply more of the same.”¹ Spiritual friendships with those who follow other religious paths help us to resist vices such as these.

Every friendship, no matter how good or how old, once involved making a hospitable place in our lives for a stranger. After all, every friend, no matter how good or how old a friend, was once a stranger. This practice has spiritual value. Welcoming a stranger entails a de-centering of the self. We are moved off our home ground. The sovereignty of the ego is undermined. In welcoming a stranger, we have to make room for another way of imagining the world and acting within it. Sartre was unable to see the advent of the stranger as anything but a threat. Emmanuel Levinas, reflecting Jewish tradition, saw the stranger not only as threat, but also as beatitude.² Welcoming the stranger brings a loss of security, but also a loss of hopelessness; the ruination of autonomy, but also a liberation from self-absorption.³



Every friend was once a stranger. Less obviously, friendships of lasting value and depth retain a sense of the stranger in the friend. This is very true of my friendship with Masao Abe. Years ago, I spent an evening with Professor and Mrs. Abe in their home in Kyoto. Sensei was unusually gregarious and informal that evening. He wore a summer kimono. In July, the taste of cold



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noodles goes nicely with the drone of cicadas in the garden and the clean smell of the *tatami*. Not knowing any good Japanese word for what I was trying to say, I told Mrs. Abe that everything was *gemutlich*. Sensei laughed as he tried to translate it into Japanese for us. In the alcove was a very simple flower ar-

rangement and a hanging scroll with Chinese characters painted in a spontaneous hand. I asked Sensei about the calligraphy, thinking that it might be his own. As it turned out, the characters were drawn by my teacher's teacher, Kitaro Nishida, one of modern Japan's most original thinkers. The scroll contained the characters: form, emptiness, emptiness, form. Now able to read the scroll, I was left with a sudden sense of what a stranger Masao Abe remains for me.

"Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." This famous teaching comes from the Heart Sutra and tells much about why my cherished teacher and friend is still a stranger to me. According to this teaching, sensible forms, the objects we fashion out of our passions and obsessions and call "reality," are in fact "empty." They are illusions fashioned by what the Buddha called "the mind on fire." All our pretensions to selfhood—our construction of racial and national identity, our preoccupation with status, our obsession with autonomy—are but fleeting forms without substance, founded on nothing. They do not endure. They are empty. Clinging to such forms as if they were real and enduring only entangles us in a world that will never be satisfactory. This is *samsara*, what the Lotus Sutra calls the "burning house" of sorrow. The path of wisdom, the path that leads to an extinguishing of the fires that inflame the mind, entails renunciation. Clinging to empty forms will never be satisfactory. When clinging ends, empty forms no longer constitute a prison of our own construction. The forms become just transient manifestations of the emptiness that characterizes everything. Wisdom, for a Buddhist like Masao Abe, means finding freedom in the realization of the emptiness of all things through non-attachment.

Form is emptiness, but according to the Heart Sutra, the reverse is also the case. Emptiness itself is merely form and has no existence apart from the fleeting and ever-changing shapes taken by the world. This means that emptiness is not a transcendent realm beyond this world. Awakening to the emptiness of all things does not entail an "ascent" of the soul into a realm beyond the world. Form is emptiness—and emptiness is simply the myriad forms themselves. Therefore, in speaking of emptiness, Sensei likes to use phrases strange to me like, "the original naturalness of all" (*jinen*) and the "true suchness of things" (*shin-nyo*). For my friend, things have no "beyond." Visible forms are not symbols that speak of what is "higher." In a way that would have been utterly foreign to the Psuedo-Dionysius, my friend does not live in a world in which appearances open up into a redeeming transcendence. Form is emptiness and emptiness is form—nothing more. There is nothing beyond empty forms because there is no beyond.

For many years, in our discussions, Masao Abe and I have tried to find a place for my God in those Chinese characters. Neither one of us has succeeded to the degree we had hoped. Form is emptiness. Emptiness is nothing other than form itself. In the asymmetrical grace of a flower arrangement, in the play of textures, tastes and sounds of the tea ceremony, in Nishida's spontaneous

hand—there is the suggestion of a kind of intimacy of all things. In the “true suchness of things” and the “original naturalness of all,” the perfectly ordinary finally becomes numinous in itself, without bearing the burden of pointing to a transcendence beyond it. Zen is witness to an immanence so radical and uncompromised that the Otherness of the Christian God is overcome.

At the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, Solomon had to deal with the unimaginable Otherness of God: “Even the heaven and the highest heaven cannot hold you, how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). The “true suchness of things” negates the unimaginable Otherness of Solomon’s God. The “original naturalness of all” deconstructs the transcendence of the God of Zion.⁴ In my friend’s Buddhist world, there is neither a Creator nor a creation that witnesses to the Creator. The heavens do not declare the glory of God. There is only the drone of cicadas, the clean smell of *tatami* and the taste of cold noodles, in Kyoto, in July, underneath the hanging scroll. Form is emptiness—but emptiness does not lie beyond form. Nothing lies beyond the intimacy of forms. But unlike my friend and teacher, I cannot abide contentedly in this “original naturalness” that is without transcendence. The hound of heaven will not allow me to rest in this intimacy with the ordinary. In this, Sensei is not like me. He does not know what it means to be pursued by such a hound. For all our friendship over the years, there still are times when we look at one another in what only can be called an appalling bewilderment. This friend of mine remains a stranger.

So, as I began to discern the shape of those Chinese characters on the hanging scroll with Sensei’s help, a poorly alloyed mixture of regret and gratitude began to arise within me. My dear friend and teacher, Masao Abe, for all his erudition about my God (he studied theology with Tillich and Niebuhr), does not know a God beyond the world of forms. He does not know the subjectivity that arises by being addressed by the Holy One of Israel, as Abraham was. Beyond the “true suchness of things,” there is no transcendent One who creates and redeems, who judges but also relents. The regret arises because I recognize the goodness of the Buddhist path but cannot embrace that path as a believer and practitioner. I am not a Buddhist. To say so would be not only pretense, but harmful to Buddhism. I will not hurt my Buddhist friend. The gratitude arises in the fact that my Buddhist friend has been such a patient and generous teacher. I cannot be a Buddhist. I can, however, be a friend to Masao Abe. My spiritual friendship with this Buddhist is a way to embrace and honor what I cannot become.⁵



There is something paradoxical in my friendship with Masao Abe. In no small way, our strangeness to one another is the bond that holds our friendship

together. Sensei, I think, would agree. I have other friends who manage to inhabit the world of Zen and the world of Christian theism with little difficulty. No doubt, this is a grace and should be accepted as such by those to whom this grace is given. I have never prayed for such a grace. On reflection, I suppose the reason I do not pray for such grace is the fear that this might corrode my friendship with Sensei. Our strangeness to one another has brought a depth of spiritual purpose to our friendship. This depth of purpose, however, has been a pearl purchased at great price. My friendship with Masao Abe has required me to find my way in territory uncharted by my own religious tradition. This calls for some explanation.

My faith, tutored by the Catholic sacramental imagination, teaches me to watch for epiphanies. We should live life always ready to take off our shoes. In a world where the Word is always becoming flesh, my deepest spiritual instincts beg me to recognize in Sensei's Otherness yet another wondrous trace of the divine. Do I not see in the face of my friend the presence of a Mystery that both summons and beatifies? Is not this Mystery the same Otherness that led Anthony into the desert and Juan de la Cruz to an ascent into *Nada*? As a child, I was taught that the redwood trees prayed to their Creator—and that I could hear them pray if only I would quit the trail and listen hard enough. If this is true of redwood trees, how much more must this be true of my Buddhist friend? Sensei certainly invites me to quit the trail. If only I could listen hard enough, I would hear in Sensei's voice a hymn to the Creator.

Absorbing Masao Abe's Buddhist life into the encompassing Mystery of God, however, would be a betrayal of our friendship. The betrayal would not lie in the fact that my teacher has repeatedly told me that Buddhist emptiness cannot be identified with the God of Christian faith. Sensei and I have plenty of theological disagreements. The betrayal would lie in the loss of the Otherness that forms the basis of our friendship. The great Jewish thinker, Emmanuel Levinas, has taught me much in this regard. Levinas speaks of the Other as a "face" (*le visage*) that is "defaced" by incorporating it comfortably into our pre-existing view of the world.⁶ By defacing the Other, we render the "face" harmless, pressed into service of the self and the world it has constructed for itself. For my friendship with Masao Abe, this would constitute a monumental loss. Appeasing my need to make theological sense of the world would come at the expense of an enriching, if troubling, friendship. This is too high a price to pay by far.

My Buddhist friend has run me off my theological roadmap. The greatness of Buddhism, which comes to me not in any book, but in the concrete form of my devoted friend, must be the work of God. And yet, this very friend assures me that this is not the case. Learning to live off the roadmap is what makes this inter-religious friendship such good, if difficult, spiritual practice. A

friendship with someone who follows another religious path calls for a spirituality that resists the attempt to overcome difference and to incorporate the Other into “simply more of the same.” The strangeness of my Buddhist friend is not merely provisional. His Otherness is not something to be overcome. My friend’s Buddhist life cannot be situated comfortably within my Christian understanding of the world without doing violence to Buddhism and to our friendship. My spiritual practice of inter-religious friendship, therefore, is not so much a quest for understanding as a disciplined practice of listening. By “understanding,” I mean here the attempt to assimilate the Other into my Christian grand narrative. “Listening,” in contrast, means to let the Other appear as a “face,” to resist my need to deface, and above all, to dispose myself to become one who is addressed by that face, not one who addresses.

What I speak of here is something more than Christian humility before another religious tradition. Like humility, honoring my friendship—even at the expense of theological coherence—is a form of spiritual practice. In this respect, I have been changed by a great Buddhist truth and Masao Abe has been a great teacher of this truth. But to tell of this, I must tell more about my Buddhist friend.



Sitting on the *tatami* mats in that Kyoto restaurant was not the only time that Sensei has ever said “it is not enough.” In April of 1942, four months after the beginning of the Pacific War, Masao Abe entered Kyoto Imperial University (now Kyoto University) to study the philosophy of religion. He was twenty-seven years old, buffeted by criticism for not enlisting in the army, and fearful of the power of nihilism at work in his militarized society. In Kyoto, he was much attracted by the lectures of Hajime Tanabe, who was already filled with foreboding over Japan’s impending defeat and looking to Pure Land Buddhism for guidance. Zen is focused on unflagging effort on the meditation pillow and sudden *satori*. The Pure Land path, in contrast, is a Buddhism of repentance and faith in the compassion of Amida Buddha who rescues us from our egocentricity. Tanabe’s comment, “Amida is not far from here,” brought Abe to weep inconsolably in the realization that it was he who was moving away from Amida even as Amida was moving toward him. Even still, Sensei would eventually find the Pure Land path “not enough” for resisting the forces of nihilism in the world and in himself.

After the war, Abe joined a Zen meditation group that met at Reibun-ji within the great temple complex of Myoshin-ji in Kyoto. The group was directed by Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, a Zen layman and lecturer on Buddhism at the University. In December, 1951, Abe had a violent encounter with Hisamatsu that people still talk about. Zen had begun to erode Abe’s Pure Land faith and in the resulting personal crisis, the threat of nihilism had

returned to him in force. One evening, in great agitation, Abe rose from his meditation pillow and lunged toward Hisamatsu screaming, “Is this the true self?” He was restrained briefly and then left the room. Later, Abe recalled the anguish of that dark night. “It’s all a lie!” he told Hisamatsu. Still later, Abe said in despair, “I cannot find anyplace where I can stand,” Hisamatsu answered: “Stand right at that place where there is no place to stand.” Zen calls this the standpoint of emptiness.

This “place where there is no place to stand” is where my friend has stood for more than half a century. Hisamatsu introduced Masao Abe to D.T. Suzuki who was already corresponding with Thomas Merton about Zen and Christian contemplation. Abe would eventually teach at great universities in the United States and Europe and become one of the leading figures in the dialogue among Buddhists and Christians. At the heart of all of this has been Abe Sensei’s unwavering commitment to expounding the standpoint of emptiness.

In honoring my friendship with Masao Abe—even at the expense of theological coherence—I too have had to learn how to stand in “the place where there is no place to stand.” Without ceasing to be a Christian believer, my friendship with Masao Abe has required me to move off my Christian theological roadmap. In doing so, I have not become a Buddhist. Nevertheless, I have been changed profoundly by the Buddhist truth of emptiness. My Christian friends have little understanding, and in some cases, little patience with my attempt to stand in this “place where there is no place to stand.” Christianity, they remind me, is an encompassing vision that interprets the world completely. How could anything lie beyond the roadmap? Abe’s Buddhism must be the work of the Holy Spirit. Even though Buddhists do not realize it, they too give praise to the Creator of heaven and earth. In this, of course, my Christian friends speak a great Christian truth. Nothing created by God has been abandoned. No corner of reality is God-forsaken. While I stand within this Christian theological roadmap, however, the face of my friend and teacher is no longer recognizable. Looking on Masao Abe as an “anonymous Christian” does violence to our friendship. The sacramental instincts of my Catholic spirituality pose a great temptation to redraw the lines of my friend’s face into my own image and likeness.

I cannot abandon my Christian faith and I will not abandon my Buddhist friend. Therefore, in my own way, I have had to learn how to stand in the “place where there is no place to stand.” This has not meant forsaking my trust in God and replacing it with the “original naturalness of all” and the “true suchness” of things. The practice of my faith, however, has been changed profoundly by the truth of Buddhist emptiness. This brings me to a final reflection on what my friend meant when he spoke in that restaurant in Kyoto and said, “it is not enough.”



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Sensei's favorite passage from the New Testament is the *carmen Christi* (Phil. 2:6–11). Singing of the savior, the hymn begins, “. . . though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. . . .” Abe Sensei and I discussed this passage one afternoon, drinking green tea in his office. He wanted to know what “emptied himself” meant to me. I must have said something about the Incarnation of the Word in reply—I no longer remember. Sensei spoke even more softly than usual that day. “I think it means,” he began, “that Christ is a kind of bodhisattva.” I was deeply touched and, after a respectful moment, I said, “Sensei, please understand that this bodhisattva—Christ who takes the form of a slave is the only God that Christians know anything about.” Abe Sensei closed his eyes and made the whole room very quiet.

Of Buddhism's many impressive teachings, the bodhisattva ideal must be one of the most wondrous. A bodhisattva is one who, in the quest for enlightenment, has come to the threshold of nirvana itself. Ready to enter into bliss,

the bodhisattva renounces nirvana and turns back to *samsara*. This return to *samsara* takes the form of a vow to work skillfully for the benefit of every sentient being. In the bodhisattva's vow, Buddhism teaches a great and paradoxical truth. Since attachment is the birthplace of sorrow, wisdom requires that attachment be renounced. In the quest for liberation from sorrow, however, the bodhisattva is the one who has overcome every attachment save one, the attachment to nirvana itself. If the bodhisattva is to attain enlightenment, all attachment must be renounced, even the attachment to nirvana. Herein lies the paradox: only in renouncing this last attachment, our desire to abide in nirvana, can nirvana be attained. According to the bodhisattva ideal, true enlightenment involves not an escape from *samsara*, but rather a return to it in order to work skillfully and compassionately for the benefit of all sentient beings. Therefore, only by turning away from nirvana does the bodhisattva become fully enlightened. In living the vow, the bodhisattva uproots the last taint of egocentricity, the desire to find personal bliss by escaping *samsara*.

Sensei sees in Christ this paradoxical truth of the bodhisattva. Christ renounces divinity and takes on the form of a slave in order to benefit sentient beings. Because of this great renunciation, Christ is raised up and exalted. The bodhisattva is truly enlightened only by renouncing nirvana. Christ is truly divine only by abandoning divinity. By entering the world of form the transcendent monarch becomes the living God of Christian faith. According to the epigram from the Heart Sutra on Sensei's hanging scroll, emptiness is truly emptiness only when it empties itself and becomes the world of form. According to the *carmen*, Christ is truly the Christ only by renouncing his divinity and entering into the world of form.

In the bodhisattva teaching, emptiness becomes a spiritual practice, not merely a metaphysical assertion about the nature of things. In fact, when it is merely an assertion about the nature of things, emptiness is no longer empty. The bodhisattva's practice of emptiness is what Buddhists call "hard practice." Only by renouncing nirvana, understood as an escape from *samsara* and the suffering of sentient beings, is nirvana attained. Only in renouncing emptiness as a metaphysical belief is emptiness truly realized as a spiritual practice. Therefore, bodhisattva practice means standing neither in *samsara* nor nirvana, but rather in the "place where there is no place to stand." This takes the concrete form of selfless compassion.

In the restaurant in Kyoto, when my friend and teacher said "it is not enough," and I realized that he was talking about his life's work in spreading the Buddhist teaching about emptiness, that feeling of gratitude and regret came over me again. The regret flowed from the pathos of an old man as he realizes that this life will end before the quest is over. Masao Abe knows that he has been more creative in imagining Christianity anew with Buddhist insight than in his quest to renew Buddhism with Christian insight. The



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doctrine of emptiness, the place where Sensei has stood for so many years, cannot encompass the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not enough.

I felt gratitude as well—the gratitude every Christian should feel before a bodhisattva. My teacher has had to do much renouncing over his almost ninety years of life. In his youth, the threat of nihilism drove Masao Abe to the Pure Land path of faith. But this was not enough. Only with much anguish and at great personal cost, my friend renounced his attempt to live by faith. Later, in the confrontation with Shin’ichi Hisamatsu, Masao Abe began to stand in the “place where there is no place to stand”—the standpoint of emptiness embraced by the Zen path. By standing “where there is no place to stand,” Sensei has lived a Zen life that has taken him to classrooms and lecterns in the West and to friends, like myself, who follow the path of Christ. But now, in his old age, my wonderful friend has realized that even the standpoint of emptiness is “not enough.” In the paradoxical wisdom of the bodhisattva, this last attachment must be renounced. The quest to become truly empty demands it. I do not presume that Sensei will stop being a Zen Buddhist. On the contrary, his words came to me as a kind of promise that he will continue to be a good Buddhist for my benefit. I am so grateful for this.

“It is not enough” was the vow of a bodhisattva, the voice of a true Buddhist, struggling to realize the truth of emptiness as compassion.

Sensei wants me to be a good Christian. Anything less would do violence to our inter-religious friendship. My friendship with Masao Abe, however, requires me to stand where there is no place to stand. Let me then take the path of Christ, as Sensei has taken the path of the bodhisattva. I will empty myself and take the form of one who has no place to stand—the form of a believer and a friend.

In Kyoto, sitting on the *tatami* mats, halfway through lunch, while his wife and I bantered about *tsuyu* rains and hydrangeas, my teacher took the bodhisattva path, vowing to work for the benefit of all sentient beings, including his Christian friend. Sensei is now very old—too old for dialogue meetings. His life of formal dialogue has come to an end. But his vow of compassion continues. In this, Masao Abe is a true friend, a skillful teacher and a stranger to be welcomed. What is to be said in the face of such compassion? “I will continue to study; Sensei, please continue to teach.”

NOTES

1. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 82–114, esp. 111.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes trans. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 259–273. Immanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis trans. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
3. Feminist thinkers have noted that the drama of losing a false self in order to gain a “true self” is a male narrative that does not serve the needs of women very well. Women do not need to be moved off their “home ground” or lose their “autonomy.” Rather, “home ground” is what patriarchy has taken from women. Befriending the stranger is less *agon* than a recovery of *koinonia*. Therefore, inter-religious friends like Rita Gross (a Tibetan Buddhist) and Rosemary Radford Reuther may look on their spiritual friendship differently than I look on my friendship with Masao Abe. See Rosemary Radford Reuther and Rita Gross, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation* (New York: Continuum, 2001). For examples of feminist thinkers critical of the loss-of-autonomy narrative, see Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1980), and the classic article by Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” which is reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 25–42.
4. See the essay by Abe’s teacher Shin’ichi Hisamatsu, “Zen as the Negation of Holiness,” in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, ed., Frederick Frank (New York: Crossroad, 1982).
5. For a reflection on the notion of “spiritual regret,” see Lee Yearly, “New Religious Virtues and the Study of Religion,” the 15th Annual University Lecture in Religion, given at Arizona State University on 10 Feb. 1994, 6–10, 14.
6. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.